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EPISODES  
OF THE KLAIPEDA/MEMEL  
ANSCHLUSS  
IN MARCH, 1939

A. L. Arbušauskaitė\*



*This article discusses the complicated diplomatic relations between Lithuania and Germany in 1938–1939 on the basis of archive documents and historical studies. The author identifies the methods used by the Germans in the Klaipėda region in order to destroy the system established by the Treaty of Versailles, propagate national socialist ideas among the population, and spread a positive attitude to the restoration of the region as a part of the German Reich. The author offers a detailed analysis of the actions of the Nazi and paramilitary groups during the Anschluss in March 22–25, 1939. An examination of the events clearly demonstrates that the German party had a well-devised plan of Anschluss, while the population had been ideologically indoctrinated and was ready for the fateful conversion. At the same time, the reactions of the Lithuanian party ranged from servility to panic flight. The Klaipėda region was taken by the Germans without a drop of blood spilled.*

**Key words:** Klaipėda region, Klaipėda, Memel, Anschluss, Nazis, Bertuleit, Neumann

After World War I, when the Entente allies were deciding the fate of the defeated Germany, there emerged a new territorial-administrative concept of the Klaipėda region. The legal status of the region and its residents was determined by Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles which was signed on June 28, 1919. The main legal document regulating the economic, political, and social activities in the territory was the Klaipėda Convention which also included a statute. After the area had joined the Republic of Lithuania as an autonomous territory, the relations between Lithuania and Germany were dominated by the strict observance of the mentioned international legal do-

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cuments which delimited the responsibilities of the states in administrative and economic spheres.

Germany never concealed that it would struggle for the reconsideration of the Treaty of Versailles. This idea was implemented in 1929, when the Lithuanian government was gradually forced to meet all German demands. These concessions towards Germany were encouraged by Great Britain and France — the states, whose representatives signed an agreement on the transfer of the Klaipeda region to Lithuania.

On March 25, 1938, Germany demanded that the Lithuanian government should dissolve the security police and lift martial law and censorship of the German press in the Klaipeda region. Moreover, the German party insisted on limiting the authority of the governor of Klaipeda who was appointed by the president of the Republic of Lithuania, as well as the release of Neumann and Sass<sup>1</sup>, who were convicted of Nazi activities, from prison.

All the demands of Germany aimed at creating appropriated conditions for unhampered anti-Lithuanian activities of Nazis were met.

The geopolitical situation in Europe became increasingly complicated; the tension grew significantly after the conclusion of the Munich Agreement and the annexation of Sudetenland. Naturally, Lithuanians could not but speculate who would be next. At the same time, the events in the Klaipeda region were suggesting the answer to this question. An increase in tension is manifested in the events of the summer 1938: each time German passenger liners approached Klaipeda, Nazis would inspire disorders in the port.

For example, on June 4, 1938, a large crowd gathered to see off the vessel called *Tannenberg*. As soon as it left the berth, people standing on the deck started shouting "Memelländer, durchhalten!" ("Residents of Klaipeda, hold on!"). It seemed like adding fuel to the fire. In the port, the crowd started chanting Hitler's mottos, "We want to return to the Reich! One nation — one leader!". On June 31, when people gathered to meet a vessel called *Preußen*, Nazi mottos, anthems, and songs were chanted even more loudly. On June 28, when the vessel *Hansestadt Danzig* was expected to arrive, the managers of the port surrounded the berth with a high fence; a large port ice-breaker *Perkūnas* equipped with fire pumps was tied down nearby. Witnesses remember that on that day the main topic of conversations at public institutions, newspaper offices, and city cafes was the arrival of the vessel.

Towards the evening, people started to gather on both sides of the fence. Lithuanian border police was located on one side; the autonomous police of the Klaipeda region was on the other. The number of demonstrators reached several thousand people. All of them were "meeting" 50 disembarking passengers. The commandant of the Klaipeda region, the heads of border and security police, customs officers, and Lithuanian port employees arrived at the port area.

<sup>1</sup> In the course of 1934—1935 trial of 123 members of Klaipeda Nazi parties, which went down into history as the Neumann-Sass case, Ernst Neumann was sentenced to 12 years in prison. Under coercion of the German government, the president of Lithuania first commuted the sentences and later pardoned almost all the convicts, having restored their civil rights.

Later, no one could explain a further escalation of the event. When the tension in the crowds reaches a critical point, a mere spark is enough to start a fire. What became that spark? Maybe, it was the siren of the approaching vessel. Maybe, it was the water that unexpectedly tumbled on the agitated crowd from the icebreaker. There was a major confusion: Nazis threw rocks at Lithuanians, Lithuanians at Nazis, everyone fought the police. The first shots rang out, the first wounded fell on the ground... Approximately 15 police officers and almost as many demonstrators got wounded. A wounded Lithuanian, Petras Kontautas, died soon afterwards in the Red Cross hospital. Later, the fight spread to the streets of the city and was raging until midnight.

These events excited numerous comments in the international and Lithuanian press. The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs put a temporary ban on the vessels of the Seedienst Ostpreußen in Klaipėda. The Gauleiter of Eastern Prussia, Erich Koch suggested that Klaipėda Nazis should not go too far and calm down. The time was not ripe.

The chauvinistic attacks against the autonomous government continued. The Directorate announced that the public security police was dissolved because it contradicted the Statute of the Klaipėda region. The national symbols were removed from the headwear of police officers, being replaced by a green-white-red cockade. At the command of the Directorate, the portraits of the President and Lithuanian coat of arms were removed from all schools. On November 11, 1938, an assembly of the city delegates demanded that the magistrate should restore German sculptures which were removed in 1923 [1]; on December 4, the monument to Borussia was restored at the old site; the statue to Kaiser Wilhelm returned a little bit later.

On December 11, 1938, the 6<sup>th</sup> Seimelis<sup>2</sup> election took place; as a result, Nazis were elected to key positions at regional autonomous institutions. The newly elected Seimelis refused to take oath to the President of the Republic of Lithuania and the Constitution. The Lithuanian Government was forced to concede and let German teachers arrive in the region and grant them resident and work permits.

On January 23, 1939, the former administration delegated its authority to the new Directorate of Willi Bertuleit. Thus, the fate of the region was in hands of purely German administration. The new chairperson of the Directorate, a former director of a bank, the deputy commander of Ernst Neumann's storm troopers, W. Bertuleit, did not invite a single Lithuanian to the Directorate. When taking his oath, W. Bertuleit outlined his main objectives in office. The new Directorate had to follow the principles of the national socialist world view and was called to create a better future for the region. He also emphasised in his speech that the propaganda against National Socialism would not be tolerated [2].

Having become the head of the Directorate, W. Bertuleit forced all employees of autonomous institutions to sign up as storm troopers by threat of

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<sup>2</sup> A Seimelis is an elected (representative) authority of the autonomous region; Directorate is an executive body of the autonomous region.

exile into the places where the Sun and the Moon never shone [3]. Thus, the new policy of the regional Directorate was put across clearly.

It is worth noting that, in spring 1938, the released from prison E. Neumann set about carrying out the instruction of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs to establish a German Cultural Association in Klaipeda (Memeldeutscher Kulturverbund). The objectives of this Association were formulated as follows: to pave the way for German cultural and spiritual values and national-socialistic world view [2]. It introduced the Nazi salute with the right arm raised and later accompanied by the Nazi battle cry "Sieg Heil!"; the members of the Association were divided into different functional groups according to their age and psychological characteristics. An Ordnungsdienst (Order service) was created in the framework of the Association; the uniform of its members reminded that of Nazis. These groups brought together 18—30 year-old men of a height of at least 172 cm, usually athletes. Probably, many candidates were thrilled about joining the organisation; hence the Ordnungsdienst groups were numerous and existed even in small settlements.

Male Germans of an older age, who were not members of the Ordnungsdienst, had to join the Security Service of Klaipeda Germans (Memeldeutsche Sicherheitsabteilung) which followed the model of German Storm detachments (Sturmabteilung). The structure of Klaipeda Security Service was as follows: section (10—15 people), platoon (3 sections), company (5 platoons), and battalion (2 companies). In 1939, the largest unit of the Security Service was a battalion. As early as in spring 1939, only in Klaipeda approximately three thousand men signed as storm troopers [4]. On January 27, journalists of the *Tageblatt* and *Memeler Dampfboot* newspapers were invited to the office of the Security Service. An instructor Weber, who arrived from Germany, announced that four storm detachments had been formed in the region: two in Klaipeda and the district and the others in Šilutė and Pagėgiai. Moreover, a marine storm detachment had been formed too. All in all, the Security Service units brought together 6,000 people [5]. Younger people, actually teenagers, were involved in the Hitlerjugend.

In this context, one cannot but ignore the fact that each of them had its own "maintenance staff": local bureaucrats who controlled the behaviour of group members, collected information on their views, loyalty, and identified traitors. The selection was very strict; ex-convicts, the morally unstable, and unreliable were not allowed in storm detachments. Instructors kept coming to Klaipeda from Germany to train local commanders.

The chief commander of the Security Service of the Klaipeda region was E. Neumann. Aspiring to unite the German organisations active in the region, he founded a leadership group (Führerkreis) which brought together all the members of the Directorate, the leadership of the German Cultural Association, the Ordnungsdienst, the storm trooper commanders, and the leaders of the workers' front and labour unions. Almost all able-bodied males were ideologically organised and controlled.

All these events showed that the pro-German (more precisely, pro-Nazi) forces were gaining in strength and winning in the Klaipeda region. They organised a large number of loud and pompous rallies and marches. E. Neu-

mann's emotional speech delivered during a rally in Vienna helped many residents of Klaipėda believe that the time would come when the wish of all the Germans — to become a part of the Reich — would come true [5, l. 95—96]. The speech of another Nazi — the leader of all German athletes Fritz Walgahn — boiled down to the following theses: 1) no German will ever wave a white flag; 2) people want to reunite with their nation, blood with its blood and no one can interfere; 3) the time, when Lithuanians victimised and tortured Germans is gone [ibid].

The propaganda and agitators were also active in the rural area. Meetings of rural communities (Landwirtschaftlicherverein) adopted resolutions relating to the Anschluss of the Klaipėda region. One of such meetings took place on February 17, 1939 in Dirvupiai. In this resolution, the community demanded that the German commanders of the Klaipėda region should speed up the Anschluss, emphasising that they would not rest until the Klaipėda region belonged to Germany. At the same time, Berlin recommended the German leadership of the region to explain to the residents that Anschluss was impossible at the time since Germany was preoccupied with more important issues. However, it promised to secure for Klaipėda residents the right to mature in the spirit of the National-Socialism. If the Kaunas government had tried to suppress the national-socialistic movement and imposed economic sanctions, Germany would have interfered. However, at the time there were no reasons for it since Klaipėda residents were not victimised [6].

On March 17, 1939, the *Lietuvos žinios* newspaper published the following message, “Foreign press is again plagued by rumours that Germany plans to annex the Klaipėda region in the near future. In political circles, there are no messages or hints that would make it possible to draw such a conclusion. In Germany, nothing has been heard about this plan” [7].

“In the near future”... “Nothing has been heard”... However, only a few days remained before the critical events.

In Klaipėda, everything happened over night. “Klaipėda was there and Klaipėda is no longer. On Tuesday we went to sleep under the Lithuanian rule, on Wednesday we woke up under the German”, a correspondent of the *XX amžius* newspaper joked sadly [8].

March 22, Wednesday, 8 a. m. The radio of Heilsberg (the German name of the Polish town of Lidzbark Warmiński) announced that the governments of Germany and Lithuania reached an agreement on the transfer of the Klaipėda region to Germany. Half an hour later, the Moscow and Kaunas radios made the same announcements [9]. At about 9 a. m., factory sirens started wailing, swastika flags appeared on houses.

Wednesday morning was the most memorable. Swastika flags, bell tolling, factory and ship sirens, planes in the sky... The radio played only entertaining music; the German radio repeated the same phrase every thirty minutes, “Klaipėda is free!” (“Memel ist frei!”); banks were crowded; there were long queues to use a telephone.

Most Lithuanian enterprises and institutions did not suspend their operations. The Rytas publishing house kept preparing another (86<sup>th</sup>) issue of the *Vakarai* newspaper. The editorial board of this newspaper said a symbolical

goodbye to its readers, “Those who have to retreat should do this as a sailor who leaves his ship. Those who became rats will never be able to be proud of what they did... But some people will remain, despite the turns their fate can take. The remaining, keep up you spirit, be determined and careful. We should not forget that the wheel of history never stops” [1, 1939, No. 68]. Earlier, on March 21, all heads of central Lithuanian authorities were gathered by the governor Viktoras Gailius and informed about the situation developing. After that meeting, many Lithuanian officials hurried to move their families away from the Klaipeda region. The members of the Ordnungsdienst encouraged Lithuanians to leave Klaipeda, for soon it would have been late. The police calmed the residents down and encouraged them to stay<sup>3</sup>. On March 22, Governor Gailius urged residents to stay calm in his address which was published in local newspapers<sup>4</sup>.

On that day, storm detachments were moved to Klaipeda. Between 10 and 11 a. m. local units of the Ordnungsdienst and storm troopers in collaboration with the regional police occupied Lithuanian institutions: the customs, post, radio station, etc. They surrounded the building of the border police office, disarmed the officials and let them go, removed the sign of the institution, and stayed inside. The Klaipeda port was occupied by the Ordnungsdienst. Policemen armed with rifles guarded the bank and the official residence of the Klaipeda governor, which, on that day, people could still enter freely. German guards were at the post, customs institutions, and other places.

On March 22, at 9.20 p. m., the first and the last meeting of the newly elected Seimelis started. It was chaired by E. Neumann. He was the only one to deliver a speech, or, more precisely, read a proclamation on the transfer of Klaipeda to Germany, having emphasised that the Memel region would be detached from the industrial regions of Germany and attached to the agricultural lands. The speech was followed by several “Sieg Heil!” battle cries and both German anthems<sup>5</sup>, and the 6<sup>th</sup> Seimelis, which was elected with a lot of organisational and propaganda efforts, was dissolved. The region’s autonomy came to an end.

In the afternoon and evening of March 22, the arrests of Lithuanian activists and heads of Lithuanian institutions began. The arrests continued through the night. Approximately 200 people were arrested in the Klaipeda region.

<sup>3</sup> This contradiction was emphasised by the journalists of the *Lietuvos žinios* newspaper [7].

<sup>4</sup> The address was published on March 22 by the Klaipeda’s *Vakarai* newspaper, as well as other periodicals; the *XX amžius* was the first to publish the Treaty with appendices. The most read newspaper among the Lithuanians of Eastern Prussia, *Lietuvos keleivis*, published the address on March 23. Having informed that the Klaipeda region had been returned to Germany and what German demands had been met, the newspaper never touched this issue again.

<sup>5</sup> In Nazi Germany (1933—1945), there developed a tradition to conclude all mass events with the performance of two anthems: the old “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” and the so called Horst Wessel song (Horst Wessel Lied) “Die Fahne hoch”, which served as the anthem of the Nazi party.

The demand to return the Klaipėda region to Germany was supported by military forces. The 22<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiments, motorised forces of the first corps, units of the military fleet and the coast guard which were deployed closer to the border of Eastern Prussia were used to this end [10]. German troops crossed the Tilsit bridge on March 22 between 7 and 9 p.m. A part of them turned towards Pagėgiai and Šilutė, the other motorised police units and stormtroopers headed for Klaipėda, where they arrived in the evening of March 22.

In the evening of the same day, at 23.55, the Treaty on the transfer of the Klaipėda region to Germany was signed in Berlin. The Treaty was signed by the Foreign ministers of Lithuania and Germany — J. Urbšys and J. von Ribbentrop. A special secret protocol determined the time (March 23, 1939, 7 a.m.) when Lithuanian regular forces were supposed to leave the Klaipėda region.

On March 23, Thursday, long before 5 a.m., German soldiers stepped on the Queen Louise bridge in Tilsit, headed by an orchestra. Although, it was very early in the morning, a large crowd came to see the soldiers off; some people sang the national anthem.

As the *Naujasis Tiltės keleivis* newspaper wrote, a large number of soldiers were sent to the Klaipėda region — infantry, field artillery, bicycle infantry, pilots, scouts, and other units. Soldiers' moving across the bridge lasted for approximately two hours [11].

According to the German telegraph agency, at 7 a.m., on March 23, the leader of Klaipėda Germans, E. Neumann arrived in Tilsit by car. The German Minister of internal affairs, Wilhelm Frick and the leader of Prussian national socialists, Erich Koch, arrived soon afterwards. In several minutes a large convoy of cars crossed the Neman into the Klaipėda region. It was followed by groups consisting of NSDAP members waving flags, but they soon crossed the bridge back to Tilsit, as if showing that the border no longer existed.

So, E. Neumann opened the way for the occupation of the region. Motorised units of the German army were sent from Germany. Soon after 8 a.m., the German army reached Klaipėda. It was the most important and difficult day in the history of Nazi Klaipėda (Memel) — on March 23, the city was visited by Adolf Hitler.

As early as 10.30, the Klaipėda radio transmitted a message that the *Deutschland* battleship accompanied by a flotilla of several ships, hydroplanes, and military planes was heading for the Klaipėda port<sup>6</sup>. E. Neumann and W. Bertuleit hurried to the port to meet the Führer.

The Führer did not stay long in the port city. After a meeting at the port he, followed by a crowd, arrived at the square where he made a speech from

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<sup>6</sup> From a message of the second department of the Lithuanian army: “On March 23, 1939, at 10.20 a.m., a squadron of the German military fleet consisting of 31 units arrived, namely the cruised *Deutschland*, torpedo boats, minesweepers (from Pillau), the third flotilla of destroyers. There are hydroplanes. Amphibious regiments brought light wheeled cannons. Sailors are armed with carbines” [13].



the theatre balcony. He said that the Germans were not going to inflict harm on anyone in the world, but emphasised that there was a need to put an end to the suffering the Germans had endured from the whole world. The Memel Germans, he continued, had been once left high and dry by Germany when it had had to put up with shame and disgrace. But on that day, Hitler stressed, the Memel Germans were once again to become citizens of the powerful Reich which was determined to take its destiny in its own hands, even if half of the world would not like it<sup>7</sup>.

Having transferred symbolically the Memel region to the prominent Nazi E. Neumann, the Führer returned to Germany. Meanwhile, in Klaipėda around 1 p.m. a swastika flag was raised over the building of the governor's office. From this moment on, Klaipėda no longer existed. Only Memel remained. Although Lithuanian institutions normally worked until 2 p.m., at 4 p.m. loudspeakers announced that all former institutions and enterprises of the central authority had been occupied and placed under the jurisdiction of the regional authorities. At the same time, all communications between the Klaipėda region and Lithuania were disrupted; on March 22, telephone communication was cut off; in 24 hours, when it was restored, German tariffs were already applicable not only to telephone communications, but also to mail and telegrams.

In the afternoon, on March 23, the new Lithuanian-German border was guarded by frontier troops on both sides. On the Lithuanian side, it was, as usual, the border police, while on the German side there were customs officers, storm troopers, and army units. Special Gestapo checkpoints were opened at a distance of 200–300 meters from the border.

In Kaunas, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Lithuania urgently discussed practical issues relating to the detachment of the Klaipėda region. The key issue concerned the evacuation of predominantly public enterprises and their staff. The meeting resolved to establish a consulate general of Lithuania in Klaipėda; before the consulate started operating, the relevant problems had been dealt with by the Tilsit consulate which was urgently moved to Klaipėda [12].

According to the Treaty on the transfer of the region, both Governments established liquidation commissions. The Lithuanian party appointed the Chief commissioner the director of the economic department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, J. Norkaitis<sup>8</sup>. The head of the Directorate, W. Bertuleit, was appointed his German counterpart. Ernst Neumann had a general authority to make decisions of a higher status than that of W. Bertuleit. The resolution of sensitive issues was delegated to the Gauleiter of Eastern Prussia, Erich Koch. The commissioners of the both states met officially on May 24, 1939. The process of the transfer of the Klaipėda region began.

<sup>7</sup> A. Hitler's speech made from the balcony of the Klaipėda theatre was published or retold by all Lithuanian newspapers [14].

<sup>8</sup> He turned out to be the most appropriate person for this. The economist and financier, J. Norkaitis was an authorised representative of the Ministry of Finance in the Klaipėda region in 1923; he headed the Klaipėda customs and knew the region and its residents quite well.

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